

ONE LIFE OR TWO?

By HENRY NORMANBY.

We are always on the look-out for new writers of ability. We think we have discovered one in Henry Normanby, whose first Story we now present to our readers. There is a strength of word-painting, and an originality of conception in the Stories which we have seen by Henry Normanby, that we think will appeal to many.

This author will contribute exclusively for some time to come to the "Grand Magazine" and the other publications of Messrs. George Newnes, Limited.

I.

HIS instant thought when the boat capsized was for the boy, whose cry of terror struck him like a knife. It was useless, he knew, to hold on to the boat, which, experience told him, would in a few minutes be carried into the outer tide-race beyond aid or hope.

He grasped it briefly, however, whilst adjusting the child who clung to his neck. He took him on his shoulders, the boy's arms still holding his neck, his legs clinging round him, beneath his armpits.

"Hold tight, sonny," urged the man; "be a brave boy, and we'll soon be home again."

He released his hold of the boat, settled himself in the water, and began the long and desperate struggle to the shore.

The strong tide was running out, so that the man swam obliquely, taking a line for a point some distance down the coast. A heavy sea was breaking, which greatly retarded his progress, and the child considerably hampered his movements.

The wind, which had wrought the disaster, joined hands with the sea to compass his ultimate destruction. The water struck heavily; it foamed and hissed about him and spat the spume of its mouth in his face. It thrust him forward and pulled him back, eddying and swirling round him. It shook him easily, flinging him to and fro, raising him high in the air and then casting him headlong into black abysses. It was cold and deep and terrible.

He encouraged the boy. "Hold tight, sonny; don't be afraid—we'll soon be home," and with no thought of his own peril the man continued the fight with his implacable foe.

Incessantly it threw itself upon him, lashing, stinging, and tearing him, biting him like a wild beast. Its pauses were sinister and its attacks

merciless. Innumerable battalions, rank behind rank, swept over him—on and for ever on, without beginning and without end.

"Steady, little one!—mustn't choke me; that's better." A treacherous wave had nearly carried away the child.

The kind land stretched its many arms to him; he could see the green fields with the warm bright sun upon them and the quiet cattle grazing on the slopes. Overhead a large bird was sailing towards the shore. He opened his mouth to comfort the boy, and the coarse sea struck him full in the face. He was glad that his face protected the child's.

Many curious thoughts came to him as he struggled in the grip of the waves. What had become of the boat; whether it floated or not; what manner of death would be his if he escaped now; what the boy would grow up to be; whether, if they were drowned, he would still cling to him; how long his wife would mourn; why the water hissed so loudly; how his wife would smile upon him, through her tears, when she heard of his hard-fought fight. This last thought braced him to further effort, and it was good to him to feel the tiny arms clinging to his neck and the little legs to his body. How inexpressibly sweet to deliver the child out of the hands of the Destroyer!

So he struggled afresh and fought his terrible adversary minute by minute. The water rose and leaned over him, gazing with green, glittering eyes; it curled above and fell upon him, roaring, foaming, seething, and boiling; never showing sign of weariness, never hastening, never impatient. When each wave fell another straightway took its place. Eternal conquest was the sea's. It waited, knowing.

As his progress to the shore became slower and more uncertain, and as his strength began to wane, the conviction came to the man, by degrees, that both of them would never reach it alive. At first he was merely doubtful, but soon the doubt became a certainty, and it had to be met and considered.

"That's a good boy; hold on, sonny—soon be home now." So constantly he encouraged and cheered the child while steadily his strength declined, and hope died slowly out of his heart.

Once the boy was torn from him, but he quickly regained him, and, more impressed with the growing peril, added a stimulating note of asperity to his warning.

"Hold tight, now, or I shall lose you!" The child's slight weight oppressed the swimmer; he swam lower in the water, rose heavily, and the sea more easily broke over him. Yet he never ceased to comfort and encourage the child, who clung to his neck, terror-stricken.

Oh, how far off the near land was! How deep the shallow water!

He was now close in under the land, and had almost reached the point towards which he had been struggling. He raised his head in order to better estimate his position, and there, straight in front and above him, was his own house and the white figure of his wife standing at the door. At the same moment a large wave engulfed him. As he painfully rose he gave utterance to a long, low cry; it was the first and only sign of his supreme despair. Nothing in the whole tragedy of the thing had so moved

him ; yet, even then, when his hour seemed come, when everything suddenly became opaque and a dull, rushing thunder sounded in his ears, even in that desperate moment the thought came uppermost, and brought a serene consolation with it, that his wife could by no means see *him*, a tiny, unconsidered speck in an expanse of tumultuous waters.

The house was quickly lost to view as the outgoing tide carried the indomitable swimmer with it, but he magnificently held on, and inch by inch approached the shore. The uproar of the surf stunned him, long whips of seaweed clung about him, harassing him, dragging him down. The turbulent sea swept over him and under him, round and about him ; it called up the underlying sand to its aid and scourged him therewith, casting it into his eyes and mouth. It threw its yellow froth upon him contemptuously, washed him free of it, then cast it upon him again ; it hurled him hither and thither, mocked him, jeered at his helplessness, and taunted him with its superb strength.

Ah, just a little farther, just a little longer, for her sake !

He was quite close now, the shore was almost within his reach, he could nearly touch the long weeds which trailed from the low-lying rocks ; he stretched out his hand to grasp them, when a sinister current laid hold of him and drew him steadily back. Slowly the land receded, stretching out its futile arms.

It was then that the choice was presented to him. The sea, tempering its sublime justice with mercy, proffered it dispassionately. It could do nothing else ; a sacrifice was demanded, was inevitable, but one would suffice. Even while its terms were being made manifest an anticipatory wave lifted the child from his shoulders. Yet again he recovered his treasure, and the wave subsided, waiting.

There was little time for consideration, but the man judicially considered their claims—those of his wife and those of the child. He thought of her standing at the door, waiting for *him*. It is worthy of record that he never once thought of himself. It may also be said that never had the boy been so dear to him. He terribly believed that both could not escape. Either he must abandon the child or perish with him.

It seemed, of the two appalling alternatives, the less evil that he should save himself for his wife—at least that he should try—since the child alone could by no means be saved. The limit of the boy's claim, unuttered, yet clamouring aloud, had surely been reached ; that his father should perish also, without further effort, seemed not only unnecessary but unjust.

The claim of the mother, actual and potential, was assuredly greater. The boy had been, as it were, lent to them. Both husband and wife were young.

But perhaps, even yet, some beneficent power would lend its aid and furnish a kinder solution. He was almost safe, the child also ; let him, at any rate, not yield too soon !

" Hold tight, my little one—my brave boy ; we're nearly home."

The broken shore-water beset him sorely ; it struck him unsparingly, unceasingly, dealing him cruel, ungenerous blows ; the insatiate sea

played with him, tossing him hither and thither, chilling him to the marrow and sapping his remaining strength, crying insistently for the sacrifice. The bright green land stretched its arms to him; the bright green sea leaned over him, watching his struggle with cold, glittering eyes. The bird had sailed shoreward and found its nest. A deadly fear coiled about his heart; yet he still fought the great fight, greatly losing.

At length, so heavy was the encumbrance of the child and so rapid the declension of his strength, the man could strive no longer, and a new fear arose—that the boy would cry out, would appeal to him. That, surely, would sound the lowest depth of his tragedy, would reach the sum-total of the calamity about to befall.

One more futile, despairing effort, a last blow at the overpowering enemy, and the weary warrior gave in. He disengaged the boy's weak hands and turned to him, still holding him above the water. "Sonny," he gasped, "I must let you go. I can't swim any longer—good-bye, my little one—oh, God forgive me!" He kissed the child, who made no protest, no appeal, no resistance, only held his small lips together. The father let go, the waiting wave rushed forward, seized its defenceless victim, and straightway slew it.

Relieved of the oppression, the man struck out again for the shore, and in less than a minute, to his unspeakable horror, his knees touched the hard sand and he was safe. He turned in agony to look for the child, but there was nothing to be seen—nothing but the wide waste of pitiless waters.

II.

The shadow of a man toiled painfully up the path which led to his house. He paused awhile at the gate, feeling respited that his wife was within. Through all the dark horror of the thing which had been and which was to be, a ray of comfort gleamed—the thought that he had at least *her*. It sustained him, preventing him from utterly breaking down.

He slowly crossed the little garden, stumbling over something on the grass—a child's toy horse. It startled him as though it had been alive. As he entered the house his wife came forward to greet him, adding in a tone of slight irritation:

"How late you are—and how wet!" then, with the premonition of disaster, "What is it? What has happened?"

He intended to soften the blow, to announce the fact gradually, alloying it at first with falsehood; but somehow, in the face of the great issues at stake, in the presence of so sacred, so profound a sorrow, the man could not lie, could not prevaricate, could only weakly tell the strong truth.

"The boat capsized—and——"

"Oh, my God! Where's Jack—he isn't—?"

He made no answer, but sat down, burying his face in his hands, while his wife went on in rapid, distracted tones:

"Where's my boy? Where is he? Oh, for God's sake say he's safe! Tell me!"

The father rose. Laying his hand on the mother's shoulder, he gazed into her eyes, in his own the light of an enormous sorrow.

"No; Jack's gone—only I am safe!"

She shook off the hand and faced him, white and still as marble.

"Gone?—but he was with you—you took him out!"

"Yes," he answered dully: "I took him out—I tried to save him—I tried hard—we should both have been drowned——"

She turned on him, incredulous. "You saved yourself and not my boy? My little boy!"

"I tried—I tried hard!"

She looked wildly at him, not choosing her words.

"You tried to save him! You saved yourself! Why did you save yourself?"

His face had become drawn and ashen; he swayed slightly, and held the table for support.

"I thought of you—only of you. I couldn't save him and myself—I had to let him go." There was a great appeal in his eyes, while hers were flooded with an unspeakable darkness.

"You drowned my boy! You murdered him! You coward!"

"Oh, no!" He stretched out a protesting hand.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked in her wild, passionate grief; "don't come near me—you are the murderer of my boy! Oh, my little boy!—my pretty, pretty boy!"

Once more, with a great dignity, he appealed to her.

"He was also my boy. Did I not love him?"

"You saved yourself!"

That which the majestic sea had signally failed to do this pitifully trivial woman did without effort. The man sank into the chair again, stricken, exhausted, and appalled.

"I tried to save him—I tried hard!" he repeated; and then, without any reproach, and in the tone of supremest sorrow, he added:

"I did not know I was so near the land; I couldn't see—I might have saved him if I had known—I saved myself for you."

This was the last drop in her cup of bitterness—the thought of the unnecessary sacrifice, the unalterable hopelessness of the loss. Her magnificent grief absolutely dominated her; she took no thought of the man—a weak, faltering, craven thing, bowed in his own misery. She remembered not his unceasing love for her; neither his supreme regard for the child. Nothing possessed her but the full sense of her own irreparable loss; she was maddened and blinded by it; she considered not the manner of her speech; love and pity were alike driven out of her heart. Her sole thought was for the precious boy whose life had been needlessly cast away. The powers of evil were upon her, and out of her mouth came the fire of Hell.

"Saved yourself for me? Would to God you had been brought here dead instead of him!"

He staggered to his feet at this frightful speech and gazed at her, unbelieving—searching her soul.

"Yes ; would to God it had been me and not him !"

But the sense also of her great injustice came to him, and once more he sought to move her.

"It was for your sake," he reiterated ; "I thought only of you. Oh, I tried hard—look at me !"

The last words traversed the whole range of despairing grief, and there was yet salvation in them had she but looked ; but in her unreasoning madness she turned away her face and again struck him.

"You saved yourself ! What am I without my child ?"

He answered steadily, "You are my wife—or were."

"I am no wife of yours ! I'll never more be wife to you ! I will never forgive you—never ! I loathe the sight of you—you murdered my boy !" In the abandonment of her sorrow she was as sublime as Lucifer.

Once more the man buried his face in his hands ; and the woman went from him, leaving him in his desolation.

III.

When the red froth of her passion had died down, and the fire of her intemperate bitterness had burnt out, the enormity of the injustice began to obtrude itself. The drawn and ashen face of her husband rose accusingly before her, and she began, unwillingly, to see that she had been cruel and detestable.

At first she combated this reparative compunction by an appeal to the dead child, but he also went over to the cloud of witnesses which rapidly gathered about her, testifying to her husband's splendour. In her heart she disagreeably knew that the boy had better loved his father than herself, and she also knew, and the weight of the truth smote upon her, that, to the man, the child was more precious than his own heart's blood.

She remembered that their only quarrel arose from her having once struck the boy for a trivial fault ; he ran to his father and clung to him. Her husband had seized her roughly and thrust her back, sternly forbidding her ever again to lay violent hands on the child. He had never so looked at her before or since.

She remembered how, in the wild winter nights, when great storms swept the water and the land, the boy, in his fear, always sought protection from his father. Her own fear, at times, though unexpressed, was there, and she herself well knew the comfort of his manly voice.

"It's all right, sonny—be a brave boy ; nothing shall hurt you."

She remembered how, when the child lay perilously ill, the father had kept unfailing watch ; how assiduously he had tended him ; how tenderly he had ministered unto him. The recollection came with a pang that her own nights had passed restfully.

She remembered now the long years of his unchanging love, the years when the boy was not. His constant consideration and unselfishness, his love for the child, and his untaltering faith in her cried out for recognition, for reward. She heard again his sad and broken justification : "I thought of you—only of you," and at length a sweet and strange peace fell upon her, born of the reflection that she still, at least, had him.

She hastened back to make amends, to express her sorrow at having so terribly misjudged him, to humbly accept the great sacrifice at his hands ; on her knees to implore his forgiveness for her grievous wrong. Only a few hours had passed, and she thanked God repentance had come so soon. She would return to mingle her tears with his, to forget, and to remember.

And all the time the strange and perfect peace was upon her, that, despite the bitter loss which was hers, she still at least had him.

As she hurried down the path which led to the cottage and then wound away to the shore, whereon could be heard the beating of the sea, she came upon a few men bearing a burden, and the mother knew, indubitably, that her irrecoverable child had come back to her. They endeavoured to dissuade her, but she thrust aside the bearers, who had paused to rest and had set down their load. Even as she went forward the strange peace shone in her eyes.

There, on the hard ground, lay the body of a little child—and of a man, his father.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What's in a name? some people ask,
Perhaps you've heard before ;
Well, I think very much depends
Upon nomenclature.

Suppose my love's called Mary Anne,
How would it look in rhyme?
To sully thus my muse's page
Would be almost a crime.

But if her name be Gladys,
Yseult, or Cymbeline,
A glamour o'er my poem comes
When I extol my queen.

And if I'm simply christened John
She'll not pronounce it oft,
But, Rinaldo, if 'twere my name,
She'd say in accents soft.

And surnames too important are,
For how would simple Smith
Look writ up large in letters gold
Upon a monolith?

While maidens fair, all prone to love
Extol in language blithe
The man whose fate it is to bear
The noble name of Smythe.